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BY

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1.

Letters on Contemporary American Authors

I

April 20th, 1919

My dear G——:

I cannot tell you how pleased I am to hear that I was wise in expecting you to appreciate the genius of Cabell. In what you say about him I observe that capacity for apt criticism which used to delight all your friends. You conclude that he must be an artist of great originality because you can find no one to compare him with. Here, it seems to me, you have struck upon the thing that will puzzle the campus Aristotles and Chautauqua tom-tom beaters who write our histories of literature, when, eventually, they will have to bow to this Cabell. They will find it impossible to put him into any of their convenient pigeonholes, and benighted indeed will be that pedagogue who must handle the unusual scrib-

bler. For I have come to the conclusion that Cabell is the only American (except, possibly, the Edgar Saltus of "Imperial Purple") who is essentially unlike every one else writing in the world today. The attempt to make him out a mere colonial echo of Arthur Machen is precisely as intelligent as would be an attempt to make Dreiser out as a mere colonial echo of George Bernard Shaw.

As you undoubtedly realize, this is quite evident to those who have studied our contemporary letters. Take the novel, for instance. Though Dreiser has apparently deserted it, the younger men have evidently derived most of their inspiration from his works and attempted to emulate them (always failing, of course). Likewise, in what passes currently for poetry, we see at all points the tendencies championed by our friend Pound,—a truth admitted by Carl Sandburg. And in criticism, though we have such able connoisseurs as H. L. Mencken, George Jean Nathan, Carl Van Vechten, and others of not inconsiderable merit, such as Louis Untermeyer, Francis Hackett, Wilson Follett and Burton Rascoe, what could better express their dependence upon the chief cultural personage of our day and country

than the exclamation of one of them: "What we all owe to James!"

Yes, G——, if it is a question of individuality, this Cabell stands alone. The ancestry of his creative genius seems almost as dark as that of a dweller in Storisende. An artist with such a remarkable capacity for fanciful imagining, and with such a feeling for the tones and colors of words, phrases and sentences, is a noteworthy anomaly in the day of the Great Levelling.

His prose is always beautiful, but I believe that it is at its very best in "The Cream of the Jest." Here there is one of the most penetrating and delightful passages I have ever encountered. The dream girl Etarre is disclosing certain secrets of the Wardens of Earth concerning the eternal jest, and comes to these conclusions about the physical manifestations of life:

"Living things aimed toward symmetry. In plants the notion seemed rudimentary, yet the goal was recognizable. The branches of a tree did not put out at ordered distance, nor could you discern any definite plan in their shaping: but in the leaves, at least, you detected an effort toward true balance: the two halves of a leaf, in a rough fashion, were equal. In every leaf and flower and

grass-blade you saw this never entirely successful effort.

"And in insects and reptiles and fish and birds and animals you saw again this effort, more creditably performed. All life seemed about the rather childish employment of producing a creature which consisted of two equal and exactly corresponding parts. It was true that in most cases this effort was foiled by an uneven distribution of color in plumage or scales or hide; but in insects and in mankind the goal, so far as went the eye, was reached. Men and insects, to the eye at least, could be divided into equal halves."

It impressed me so strongly—this idea that John Charteris terms the artistry of "the shape-giving principle of all sentient beings"—that I felt that sublime exaltation known at times to those not possessed of the plebeian fear of ideas.

What seemed so remarkable to me was the way this idea led me to disregard, for a moment, the daily round which I, like Villon, had found so "horrid", and permitted me to imagine that there really is an artistry inherent in all things. My natural faith in the superiority of human quintessence was likewise forgotten: the plant and the insect assumed fully as much importance as man.

My mind was captive to the conception of a Gargantuan Creative Artist.

But I could not confine my thoughts for long to this. For it appears that nowadays I am absolutely unable to derive any lasting satisfaction from such musings, however pleasant they may seem at first. My mind is constantly reverting to the bald fact that the thing called existence has yearly become to me an ever deepening mystery. The older I get the more difficult I find it to close my mind even momentarily to the meaninglessness of the thing. As I look back, today, I see behind me youth, love, the will to power—gifts bestowed for no apparent reason, and quite as ridiculously taken away. I remember having experienced certain passions for or against ideas, beliefs and persons; but I cannot determine that I ever once consciously employed any of them to shape my life. I am not sure that I have been a mere "adaptive mechanism", but I seem to have drifted most of the time. The meaninglessness, the hopelessness of it all!

"Meaningless and hopeless?" you are probably saying. "Well, if so, what are we to do about it?"

What the race has done, in order to avert the seemingly inevitable madness or suicide, is to

create various illusions, by means of which life is made (in the conventional phrase) worth living. Thus have been born love (in its softer forms), religion, the arts, and all the multifarious other devices by which man contrives to forget his "plight in the universe." They are his spiritual hot water bottles in a too chilly world.

The rule of life, if we may so put it, is, I suppose, every man to his illusions. Thus you busy yourself with your home, your children and your social affairs, while I occupy myself with pictures, scores, and the like. If we ever reflect upon these attempts to read a meaning into what is obviously meaningless, we must be amazed at the capacity of the human animal to hornswoggle itself, but, whether we are ever so amazed or not, we certainly keep up the deception.

Was it Jules de Gaultier or the first paleolithic philosopher who said that man lives solely by means of illusions? Anyway, it is this viewpoint that is manifest in all the books of James Branch Cabell, and would warrant us in regarding him, even were he not the master of English he surely is, as the most phenomenal literary genius of the time.

II.

II.

May 25th

Dear G——:

It may appear that this answer is unwarrantably tardy, but I have a sufficient reason—namely, that I've been in Chicago for two weeks and, as ever, have found the place so engrossing that I haven't written a word to anyone. For Chicago, I'm beginning to realize, is not only the live stock and mail-order center of our country, but the cultural center as well.

I do not say this because Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and Henry B. Fuller live there. Other cities could claim writers as important as these four—notably, Baltimore, with Lizette Woodworth Reese and Henry Mencken. It seems to me that the cultural standing of a city is not determined by the number of significant literary and artistic personages in its directory, but, rather, by its general cultural atmosphere as reflected in the criticism of the *beaux arts* to be found in its daily newspapers.

This may at first seem ridiculous to you, but if you'll consider it a while I'm sure you'll agree with me. And it is upon this that I base my high-sounding claim for Chicago. Imagine, for example, a civilized Continental, on his first trip to our shores, reacting with other than wonder and pity to even the best of the New York literary supplements, or their feeble imitations in other eastern cities. And next, imagine how he would be awakened and stimulated to enthusiasm by the discerning and thoroughly sophisticated kind of criticism on tap in the home town of the virtuous anti-white-slave law. For the Chicagoans who steal good advertising space for comment upon scribbling, the cavorting of mimes, the making of tunes, and the daubing of colors, are ideally fitted for their jobs. And especially is this true of the literary critics. There is one of them, Burton Rascoe, of the "Tribune", who, in my opinion, ranks second to Mencken among American assayers of contemporary letters.

"The Chicago Tribune", G——, gives the lie to all this gabble about journalism being deflowered by the capitalists. For, though its owners and editors certainly have sprung from that class, still it seems so completely informed and so dis-

illusioned that it has the undisputed right to be called one of the sanest daily journals in the world. It has committed its assininities, of course, and is even still repeating some of them. For one thing, it often shows a distinctively middle-class swinishness; as witness its recent demands for the removal from power of the German aristocracy and its replacement by the class of rich hogs who disgrace the United States, France and England. Then, too, its editors were colonels or generals or something of the kind in the recent imbecility, and have lately introduced into the editorial page a sort of windy Prussianism. But these things are of small account. The fact remains that the "Tribune" is the one American newspaper in which we can take even a hundredth as much pride as do Englishmen in the "Manchester Guardian."

But I started to tell you of Rascoe. I met him through Henry B. Fuller. (You will remember Fuller as the author of those remarkable novels, "The Cliffdwellers" and "With The Procession", to which Huneker introduced us in Paris.) It has been only about a year now since Mencken got me into the habit of buying the "Saturday Tribune", and in that time I've been gradually

getting more eager to meet his Hinterland Henry le Gourmont. For Rascoe is the kind of critic I once aspired to be. He is receptive to new ideas, tolerant, and thoroughly acquainted with the modern literatures of the Continental countries, especially the French. Further, he is almost the only newspaper critic within my memory (Mencken excepted, of course) who has not invariably written as though he were in either a trance or a tomb.

Rascoe has recently challenged Mencken to a pen duel over the origin of the new poetry. Henry has provoked him by stating that it came from France; and Rascoe's challenge takes the form of a chronological list, headed by Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and containing all the important works of French *vers libre*, and purporting to prove that the poetical infirmity in both countries was contracted from America's "democratic" bard. Though the outcome of the combat is still somewhat in doubt, I believe Mencken—provided he makes use of the excellent ammunition available—will win easily. Let me tell you why I believe this.

In the first place, Rascoe overlooks the fact that about the whole movement there is an exotic

tang. Many of the poets themselves are obviously Continental Europeans, and even those who are more or less native show in their work features which are anything but American.

In the second place, our critic, in his desire "to get something on" the everlastingly right Henry, has damnfooled himself into thinking there is some resemblance between Whitman's work and *vers libre*. I don't need to take the trouble to disprove this—at least if you're as intelligent as formerly.

Finally, Rascoe has made a mistake which, though a very grave one, is not at all to be wondered at, inasmuch as it has been made by every well-known critic in the country. I refer to his acceptance of French *vers libre* and American free verse as of the same *genre*. Now, though I am certainly not fit for the task, I feel sure that it could be proven that there is much difference between them—chiefly, of course, in that *vers libre*, in contrast to free verse, ofttimes has meter and rhyme,—the result of the effort to secure rhythm by means of accent. In other words, *vers libre* is not free at all in the same sense as free verse, but is merely the final rejection of even the appearance of syllabism in French poetry—which

had come over from the Latin about the tenth century and persisted in even the best of Verlaine—and the employment, instead, of the foot system.

I suppose you are protesting that by making this distinction between the two forms, I have disproven my statement that the new poetry came from France. However, I still believe it to be true, inasmuch as most of the free verse seems to be merely imitations of English translations of *vers libre*.

This particular invasion has undoubtedly been brought about through the interest of American critics—notably, Vance Thompson, Huneker, and, more recently, our friend Ezra—in the literature of modern France. Especially is Pound to be blamed. Let me say here that I still regard him as one of the phenomenal figures of our present-day literature, but for a quite different reason than formerly. In the last five or six years, I have ceased to regard him as a concoctor of new forms of verse, a rebel destined to revolutionize the art of poetry. Here is an estimate taken from a little book entitled "Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry"—which seems much fairer than my former one:

"Ezra Pound has been fathered with vers libre in English, with all its vices and virtues. The term is a loose one—any verse is called 'free' by people whose ears are not accustomed to it—in the second place, Pound's use of this medium has shown the temperance of the artist, and his belief in it as a vehicle is not that of the fanatic. He has said himself that when one has the proper material for a sonnet, one should use the sonnet form; but that it happens very rarely to any poet to find himself in possession of just the block of stuff which can perfectly be modelled into the sonnet. . . . Pound's vers libre is such as is only possible for a poet who has worked tirelessly with rigid forms and different systems of metric. His 'Canzoni' are in a way aside from his direct line of progress; they are much more studies in mediaeval appreciation than any of his other verse; but they are interesting, apart from their merit, as showing the poet at work with the most intricate Provencal forms. . . .

"The freedom of Pound's verse is rather a state of tension due to constant opposition between free and strict. There are not, as a matter of fact, two kinds of verse, the strict and the free; there is only a mastery which comes of being so

well trained that form is an instinct and can be adapted to the particular purpose in hand."

The further truth about him is that he is a writer with a sense of humor among literati who appear to be without such a thing. We see this illustrated in all the talk that goes on about his connections with various schools of poetry. The fact is that he joins these simply for the fun; he seldom has much to say until the fanatics have reduced their theories to downright imbecility. Then he writes a perfect burlesque of the school's work and publishes it as a serious effort—yea, as the most perfect embodiment of the school's theories; and while the few fortunate ones who understand him are laughing, he is out looking for another school—to burlesque.

You are perhaps wondering what is my conception of poetry. It seems to me that poetry aims at the imaginative realization by the reader of an impression in the mind of the poet, and that its means of accomplishing this is the relating of the impression to a familiar thing which, while different, has a degree of similarity. It is just here, in dwelling upon the purpose of poetry as the pointing out of sameness with difference, that we can get at the truth concerning the concoctors of free

verse. And that truth is, that while many of them have used this means of realization rather well in dealing with matter, not one of them is artist enough to perceive that it can be applied to form,—to wit, in the use of metre (a regular rhythm in the line and a variable one in the sentence) and rhyme (the similarity of the rhyming words and the difference in sound of the words that immediately precede them).

Of the poets in the current movement, Sandburg, it seems to me, is by far the best. And he excels the others, not (as so many of his champions would have it) because he is one of the most radical in materials and ideas, but simply because he is the best artist. He alone has gone to the extreme of simplification in poetry—that is, he has applied the law of sameness with difference to matter without allowing it to affect form in the least. And this he has done so perfectly that I am not prompted (as I often am by the bastardized kinds) to an over-preoccupation with the poet's form through sensing his conscious effort to divorce himself from form entirely. Instead, I find myself revelling in the work of one who is so true a poet that he can create superb poetry that just misses not being poetry at all.

And yet even Sandburg doesn't always give me that experience I've learned to associate with the best art—that emotional elevation to the point where an illusion is accepted as reality. For this I have to go to poets who are outside the present movement, and who are such genuine artists that they can apply perfectly the law of sameness with difference to form as well as matter. In fine, I have to go to such poets as Lizette Woodworth Reese, Sara Teasdale, John G. Neihardt, George Sterling, and John McClure. Here are five artists (and perhaps there are others who belong with them) who are seldom mentioned in the reviews of contemporary poetry, and for the neglect of whom the writers of these reviews will some day, I confidently believe, have to repent.

But if we reflect upon the inability of these critics to free themselves from preoccupation with the present movement, we will understand the chief reason for their oversight. For indeed, the American critics who have confined themselves exclusively to the consideration of poetry—Amy Lowell, Louis Untermeyer, Conrad Aiken—are not only enraptured by the inanities of the new verse, but are each trying, in his poetry, to do something new.

In addition, each has some peculiar handicap as a critic. Miss Lowell, for example, is so deficient in analytical power that she often fails completely to understand her subject. Here are two fair samples of her criticism, both about some one we knew—de Gourmont:

" 'Physique de l'Amour' is a most interesting volume on the sexual instinct in animals. . . . I cannot help thinking it a little odd that this should be the only purely scientific essay he has written. Interesting though it is, contemplated in its place among Gourmont's work as a whole, should we not consider it as another evidence of that preoccupation with sex which has robbed his books of the large view they might have had? . . .

"I have only considered him as a poet. And in spite of his tales, his novels, his plays, his criticism, and his essays, I believe him to be first of all a poet."

Untermeyer, too, is far from ideal, because he cannot avoid judging poetry by political and patriotic standards—perhaps the worst curse a critic can suffer. Even, Aiken, undoubtedly the best of the three, lets his appreciations be hurt by a psychoanalytical hangover.

Mencken, indeed, is the only critic who gives

poets like McClure the acknowledgment they merit; and for this he is snickered at by all the other critics of the day, and is contemptuously dismissed by Aiken as "essentially of the older order", with "an embarrassing tenderness for all that is sentimental, politely romantic, formal, ethically correct".

III.

III.

June 10th

My Dear G——:

In your recent letter you have asked me why I spend so much time and ink upon "the affectations of that sublimated column conductor". You admit that he is entertaining, but you fail to perceive in him any real merit as a critic, and you conclude, therefore, that he is merely "a very clever pyrotechnist". An opinion widely held in America: Mencken as a kind of intellectual jumping jack. Before I explode this, I must say something about the current literary criticism of the country.

I will pass by such connoisseurs as Huneker, Lewisohn, Brooks, Wright, and Heller, and speak only of the intelligent reviewers who concern themselves with the contemporary letters. By "intelligent", of course, are disqualified all those derelict street walkers from the old "Dial" and "Nation" establishments who waste so much good space in big eastern dailies; and there remain

such critics as Conrad Aiken, Louis Untermeyer, Burton Rascoe, Francis Hackett, Philip Littell, Floyd Dell, Llewellyn Jones, William Marion Reedy, and the aforementioned Mencken. Of Aiken, Untermeyer, and Rascoe I have spoken in a former letter, and I shall not discuss them further here. Nor shall I say more of Hackett, Littell, Dell, and Jones, than that they are talented critics, and—But I want to talk about somebody else.

One of the few things I have to regret in my life is that I've never met William Marion Reedy. In the years he has edited his "Mirror" in St. Louis, he has been a *tour de force* in our literature, acting as literary godpapa to such writers as Sara Teasdale, Zoe Akins, Orrick Johns, and Edgar Lee Masters. When he finds a book worth writing about, you can expect a rare treat indeed, for he tackles the job with all the zeal of a dipsomaniac let loose in a well-stocked cellar: you always feel that here is a connoisseur who is really in love with a great art. Of course, when he gets away from literature he takes up with a lot of things I dislike—the single tax, government ownership, labor unionism, et cetera; indeed, he carries a man-sized load of such firy stuffs and seems ever

willing to take on a little more. But he is always so good-natured and so fair, and he always handles his pen so well, that I never fail to find him worth listening to, whatever may be his subject.

We do wrong to take Reedy so much for granted and so seldom to acknowledge what we owe him. He is one of the two most powerful influences for good in our present day letters; he is conducting the only literary weekly in the country; and he is one of the four or five supremely delightful writers now appearing between magazine covers. Why doesn't someone write an adequate appreciation of him? The only thing written about him that I recollect is a portrait in free verse by Edgar Lee Masters, published in "The Fra" three or four years ago. He deserves more exhaustive treatment at the hands of our literati.

By the way, why doesn't Reedy write his memoirs? His experiences, merely chronicled, would be of incalculable interest, and embellished with his whimsical humor, keen sarcasm and critical discernment, they would make one of the best pieces of autobiographical writing imaginable.

And now, my dear G——, we come to Mencken and your opinion that he is a clever smartaleck,

but not to be taken seriously—in fine, that he is serving us monthly a brew which, were its kick extracted, would turn out to be very poor Bevo.

I have known Mencken since—Well I'll quit that, because, as I've already noted, your statements seem to imply that you know him yourself —perhaps too well. Just to prove my fairness in judging him, let me set down some of the things about him which I don't like.

First, then, I will say that I consider his talk of the superiority in intelligence of woman to man to be the lighter-than-air theorizing of a too philosophical-minded old hermit. And secondly, —But my head is too heavy tonight to let me hunt up another excuse for damning him, and so I'll tell you why I consider him the ablest American critic of our day.

I have spent the last two days reading over nearly everything he has written, from that little book of verses (I wonder if you've ever seen it) to his recent gigantic philological tome, and I now find myself more sure than ever that the forces which have had most influence in shaping his development are the two chief intellectual figures of the nineteenth century—Huxley and Nietzsche. True, the effects of less significant forces are

apparent in much of his work—of Ibsen, Shaw, Huneker, perhaps others. But everywhere are to be observed the influences of the literary interpreter of Darwinism and the Germanic Evil One. From them he got encouragement for his skepticism, for his intellectual curiosity, and, most important of all, for his utterly disillusioned—his aesthetic—view of life.

These characteristics were apparent in his first critical effort in book form, "George Bernard Shaw; His Plays", published in 1905—the first book devoted to the discussion of the works of the "wild Irishman". Just why it is so seldom mentioned nowadays in considerations of Shaw's plays I'm sure I can't make out, as even a short quotation will prove its worth:

"Popular opinion and himself to the contrary," says Mencken, "Shaw is not a mere preacher. The function of the dramatist is not that of the village preacher. He has no need to exhort, nor to call upon his hearers to come to the mourners bench. All the world expects him to do is to picture human life as he sees it, as accurately and effectively as he can. . . .

"And so, if we divest ourselves of the idea that Shaw is trying to preach some rock-ribbed doc-

trine in each of his plays, instead of merely setting forth human events as he sees them, we may find his dramas much easier of comprehension."

No attempt here, as has ever been the fashion elsewhere, to make Shaw out a great original thinker, an iconoclastic preacher of the rank of Nietzsche. On the whole, the book remains, after a decade and a half, the best short study of its subject.

His next serious work was "The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche", of 1908. Coming at a time when the principal quality required of a critic of Nietsche was that he be mentally incapable of appreciating him, the book drew the concentrated shelling of all the would-be Hellenists who had been working overtime to put him in Hades. And even to this day it is, except among a few cognoscenti, entirely without credit in its own country.

Nevertheless, Mencken's book makes clearer than does any other that the truth which is the core of all Nietzsche's thinking, the rock upon which he erects his system, is the existence of well-defined human classes. For such critical discernment Mencken gets a thorough damning in a country where the powers of comprehension

of the guttersnipe are still the chief ones brought to bear upon products of the intellect. But he attracts the admiration of Englishmen and Europeans, and so perhaps his book will someday come to be recognized as what it is—the most interesting volume of philosophical discussion that has come out of America.

This year he sends me a fairly gigantic tome—10 inches tall by four hundred pages—entitled "The American Language", and devoted to the differences between the English now spoken over here and that of the mother country. The work is the result, I dare say, of a belief of his which he has often expressed during the last ten or twelve years—the belief, to wit, that America will be intellectually independent of Great Britain, and thus be truly a nation, only when there is so strong a barrier of language between the two countries that English critics can't read our books without the aid of an Anglo-American dictionary. This book of Mencken's is, to my mind, the greatest literary contribution to American nationalism since "The Federalist". But, of course, it is, due to its nature, rather erudite, the kind of thing one might expect of a highly intelligent professor, if there were such an animal—as, indeed, there may

be if Henry keeps on in his present vein. How would it seem to hear of the Prof. Dr. Henry Louis Mencken, Head of the Department of American Philology in—*Harvard!*

Before I go farther I want to disprove the notion, expressed frequently by supposedly sane litterateurs, that Mencken has no standards of judgment whatever—that though he occasionally states the truth about an author, he achieves it, not through any intellectual process, but by means of a kind of fisherman's luck. This is quite as untrue as the claim that he is "merely clever", and both untruths probably had a common origin in the efforts of a class of outraged pundits to "get even". The fact is, to be sure, that these learned asses have failed to find standards in Mencken's criticism simply because he, like any first-rate critic, is not continually lecturing his readers on the art of criticism. For that he has such standards—flexible, certainly, but still ever perceptible—no one who has studied his works will think of denying.

To every work he approaches he applies, more or less unconsciously, a critical formula very much like that one formerly followed by Goethe and Carlyle, and nowadays by Benedetto Croce

and J. E. Spingarn—a formula, to wit, which asks whether the task the writer has set himself is a worthy one, and then, this being determined in the affirmative, inquires how well he has accomplished it. Such a formula, in the hands of almost any other critic in the country, would, of course, soon become a vehicle for vapid moralizing; but in Mencken's case it is admirable, because it goes aptly with his thorough sophistication in the domain of ideas and his unfailing hospitality to genuine originality and novelty. With the nonfictional works which stand these tests and "come through clean" Mencken busies himself no further; but of a novel or short-story he requires something else before pronouncing it a work of art.

I refer to the principle of the two philosophical rhythms (this sounds dilettante, but I suppose the novelist's philosophy may be likened to the poet's rhythm) in great narrative fiction—a principle first recognized by Mencken himself, though not yet adequately stated even by him. Here is a paragraph by Burton Rascoe which explains one of these rhythms quite well:

"There is something intangible which only a man of genius can get into a novel and it is this

something which distinguishes a great and permanent work of fiction from the ordinary straw and plaster product of the day. It is a compound and the effect of, emotional sincerity, deep and sound perceptions of beauty, flawless art, pity, truth and irony. It is this which enriches the reader's psychic experience, *makes him partake of the hope, joy, disillusion, and final philosophy of another, and enables him to possess vicariously one more existence than frugal Nature by ordinary allows.*"

Or, as Mencken puts it himself, "emotional kinship". It is attained, in all cases I can recollect, through showing man as an "adaptive mechanism", directed ever towards self-gratification, but played upon by numerous and not easily determined forces,—in fine, through the portrayal of man as governed completely by a determinism like that which Mark Twain wrote of in "What Is Man?" By this means alone is the more sensitive reader made to experience the supreme effect possible of narrative fiction—that blending of himself with the characters of the narrative until he experiences their feelings personally.

This is probably the primary of the two rhythms (I wish I could think of another word), but the other seems quite as important to Menck-

en. It is the result of the artist's conception of man's life in the whole as a seeking without a finding, and hence a failure at once most tragic and meaningless. It was the philosophy inherent in Greek tragedy, and it has persisted in nearly every great work of fiction up to the present day. It does not require that the characters be destroyed, though this often happens: it requires only that they find the reality of life far below the expectation.

This principle of the two philosophical rhythms is, as I have said, original with Mencken, though it has probably long been unconsciously the chief criterion of the more discriminating critics. It is far more important than the old theories of form, those theories brought over from painting and drawing and the plastic arts. The principle, in truth, implies a thorough overhauling of our traditional criteria for judging fiction,—another task for the intelligent pedagogue when he arrives. Perhaps Mencken will do it himself when he takes up the birch.

It was his recognition of the presence of these two rhythms in Dreiser's novels that caused Mencken to become interested in the Hoosier, though Henry himself likes to lay it upon other

causes. For instance, he once wrote Rascoe somewhat as follows: "Why is he (*myself, of course*) always saying I discovered Dreiser? He was pretty well known before I wrote a line about him. I became involved in Dreiser's cause largely because of the efforts of the Comstock's to work up a case against him." Just who was responsible for Dreiser's being well known before Mencken championed him I can't conjecture, unless it was Edward Garnett. Now, while it is true that Garnett, when literary adviser to William Heinemann, brought about the publication of the English edition of "Sister Carrie", I am forced to believe, from what he afterwards wrote of Dreiser, that he never even sensed his genius. Here, for example, is what he wrote about "The Titan", a work vastly superior to "Sister Carrie": "We may therefore repeat that the creative imagination of our author only multiplies general patterns of insight and feeling of masses or groups of cultivated minds. And the critic, passing on, will search all the more eagerly for authors who, whether representative or not, stand out more clearly in vision and insight from the mass of cultivated minds." Not the least appreciation, you observe, of those characteristics

of Dreiser's work which make it noteworthy, the characteristics which Mencken had already pointed out. And since the discovery of a writer should, to my way of thinking, be credited to that critic who understands him so well that he can tell why he is worthy of being discovered, I still persist in my claim that Mencken really discovered Dreiser.

And the Indianan is not the only genius for whom Mencken has done pioneering. He has performed this service for such significant figures as Conrad, Nietzsche, Hergesheimer, Norris, Cabell, Willa Sibert Cather, George Ade, Bernard Shaw, George Jean Nathan, James Huneker, and a whole army of smaller fry; and in each case—as also in the cases of Mark Twain, H. G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett—he has given us the best discussion of the author yet published.

On the other hand, when a writer fails to show any real merit or encourages his public to overestimate him, he can usually expect to find in Mencken a sort of second Jonathan Swift. For our friend has to perfection Swift's knack of disposing of an adversary by simultaneously slapping him on both cheeks and kicking him to rearwards. Thus he has disposed of such stick-and-

plaster geniuses as Thorstein Veblen, Ernest Poole, William Allen White and Irvin S. Cobb, on the one hand, and such over-rated fellows as William Dean Howells, Paul Elmer More and William Lyon Phelps, on the other. Mencken is most fortunate in possessing a style which is perfectly adapted to this kind of slaughter. It has been ascribed by numerous critics to the influence of Huneker, and Mencken himself has admitted there is some truth in the claim. For myself, however, I'm sure that his style has been affected greatly by his reading of Nietzsche, but that it is as original as are most of his prejudices and ideas. Indeed, this is proven by the attempts of the boys and girls on the newspapers to imitate it. (Even I, after five years respite from criticism, often find myself unconsciously doing so.) They steal Mencken's sentence structure, even his characteristic words and phrases, but the best they ever accomplish is pretty poor burlesque.

Probably no other critic in our day, in any country, has wielded so much power as Mencken; and undoubtedly no other has had so good an effect upon his nation's letters through encouraging her young men of talent. John McClure is a case in point. If you will go back five or six years

in the files of the "Smart Set", you will find Mencken asking why some publisher did not bring out a volume of McClure's verse. Despite the ignorant indifference of the publishers, he kept on making the plea until, in 1918, Knopf finally acceded to it. The poems have since met rebuffs in every quarter; there is scarcely a critic except Mencken himself who has not spat upon them. But, personally, I am still as convinced as I was that night, several years ago, when Henry showed me the first manuscripts McClure sent him, that here was an authentic poet, an artist of the class of Lizette Woodworth Reese and Sara Teasdale.

Our young writers, it appears, have come to worship Mencken, and whether he likes it or not, he is due for endless pleas to bless and act as godpapa to multitudes of literary sucklings. Proof of how he is venerated by these young people was borne in upon me by an incident which occurred while I was motoring through western New York, about two years ago. I had stopped in East Aurora for the night and was talking over old acquaintances with Felix Shay. (He used to be in Baltimore, you remember.) One of us made mention of Henry, and Felix produced from a desk a manuscript entitled "Introducing Henry Louis Menck-

en", which he had received that week, and was undecided whether to print in "The Roycroft" or not. It was a colossal puff in favor of the ever dazzling Henry, and by its multiplicity of errors appeared to be the outgrowth of the "harmless infatuation" of some seventeen or eighteen year old boy. "Print it," I advised Felix when I was through laughing. "The youngster will no doubt come to recognize his errors and be ashamed of them. And, anyway, Henry will have his laugh."

This case is not peculiar in any way; it merely shows how our young aspirants to literary achievement of real worth regard Mencken. And, indeed, I do not know where they could find one more deserving of such veneration, or one more likely to spur them on to creditable accomplishment. Through constantly studying him, they acquire a little of his intellectual curiosity (and no American has more) and some of his high idealism with regard to art and letters, and begin vaguely to feel the wisdom of his aesthetic view of life. On the whole, they certainly get far more from him than they will ever dare to acknowledge.

I knew the late Remy de Gourmont better than did any other American (yes, even than Huneker), and believed him at once the most talented and

influential critic of his day. I now confer that distinction upon Mencken, and, further, claim him to be—But here I drift into highfalutin pralse, and Henry himself would be the first to laugh at me.

Here I find I have again turned a letter into a—well, I don't know just what to call it. There is another side to Mencken, which is to be observed in his political writings (not yet published), but I shall have to take that up some other time. Perhaps, if you'll permit me, I'll some day discuss the state of government in the world, and then this side of him will find a place.

IV.

IV.

July 2nd

My dear G——:

I suppose I must conclude that your opposition to many of my opinions, and particularly to those in my last two letters, is the result of a personal enmity for Henry Mencken. Just what has caused this, I can't conjecture; but it must have seemed momentous to you, as otherwise you would hardly speak of him as "a joker, who spends part of his time laughing at his admirers through the 'Smart Set', and the remainder playing practical jokes on them." You even intimate that the same might be said of Nathan. Will you kindly elucidate? Mencken and Nathan lore, as you must be aware, has almost gained a market value.

By the way, this Nathan is another critic who has suffered ignorant neglect at the hands of the donkeyfied blank-cartridges of the universities. I have just finished reading his latest volume, "The Popular Theatre", and feel that I would

rather, in this letter, talk about him than any other writer of the day.

To begin, then, let me say that in order to appreciate him, one must first realize the nature of the American theatre at the present moment. The best way I can describe it to you is to borrow his own words: "Our theatre remains perfectly safe for the mob."

Here I should define the term, "the mob", "the democracy", as it is correctly used in discussions of art and letters. It is the custom of the economist to divide society into classes according to occupations; thus we get "proletariat", "bourgeoisie", et cetera. Now, while such a division is indispensable in the domain of economics, it certainly is not even possible in that of "the things of the spirit". There are just two kinds of taste, good and bad—aristocratic and plebeian. To say that it is otherwise—to put taste upon an economic basis, and talk of proletarian art, bourgeois art, and so on—that is the height of absurdity. That is to assume that the wife of a member of the plumber's union would not get as much enjoyment out of a "Turn to the Right" as would the wife of a self-made millionaire.

To the contemporary democratization of the

theatre (as noted above), Nathan reacts as must every man possessed of the tastes of a gentleman.

"To hold the theatre (*I quote from his recent volume*) a mere recess pasture for the potwalloppers, a suave dive for the proletarian taste on the loose, is to make shift to establish and appraise an art in terms of the numbers of its admirers—to place a lithograph of Fatty Arbuckle above Rembrandt's portrait of Turenne, 'The Very Idea' above Rittner's 'En Route', or the autopsies of Rabindranath Tagore above those of Rammohun-Roy."

And here is the civilized conception which he sets up in opposition to the democratic one:

"From any plane of esthetic criticism higher than that from which one appraises the literature of Mrs. E. Burke Collins, the art of Austin O. Spare and Frederick Carter, the music of Charles K. Harris, the drama of R. C. Carton—or the dramatic criticism of Drama League bell-wethers—the theatre is to be necessarily regarded as an institution of an essential aristocracy: an aristocracy of beautiful letters, of ideas and wit, of viewpoint and philosophy."

I quote further:

"From that side of the theatre which has been

regarded as democratic, there has come down to us most of the rant and jabber, most of the pish and platitude, that in very slightly disguised form contrives still to overawe and enchant the pleasure-seeking skipjack and confound any man who has arrived at a sufficient altitude of scholarship to be able to differentiate between Meyerbeer and Schlitz's. From that side has come the stuff of such as D'Ennery and Cormon, Bulwer-Lytton, Sardou, John M. Morton, Mrs. Henry Wood, Dumas *fils*, Boucicault—the "Two Orphans", the "Toscas", the "East Lynnes", the "Camilles" and the "Boxes and Coxes". From the side of aristocracy, from the theatre designed originally for the elect, have come the Molieres, whose Palais-Royal company was authorized "the troupe of the King", the Shakespeares, who came under the patronage of the circles of King James and Elizabeth, the Ibsens, who had to look to an artist of the violin for their first practical theatrical encouragement and who 'had to make their way against the dullest and most disheartening of mob influences', the Hauptmanns, who were given to the theatre in the cradle of the anti-herd Freie Bühne of Otto Brahm and Paul Schlenther, and on down the list to the Bernard Shaws of the

moment who, for their first hearings, have had to rely on private societies and closed doors."

I show you his viewpoint here, because (and this fact is never comprehended by his detractors) you must know it in order to appreciate much that he writes. In the future, I feel sure, you will enjoy his criticism a good deal more, if you will remember that he is another rebel against the democratic formula in all its applications.

Now, with the rejection of the mobman's conception of the theatre goes, to be sure, the rejection of the collateral conception—to wit, the pedagogical-moralistic view of the theatre as a cart tail—the Brieux-Barker sort of thing. And with it, too, goes the rejection of all that is bad, and hence most characteristic, in the Broadway bull ring of the moment, from Belascoism to mummer-worship.

With regard to this last, indeed, Nathan has wrought what approximates a revolution: no other critic in Anglo-Saxondom has so successfully combated the imbecile theory (a part of the general William Winter curse) that the chief concern of the dramatic critic should be, not the work of the creative artist, but, as Lamb expressed it, "those low tricks upon the eye and ear, which a

player by observing a few general effects, which some common passion, as grief, anger, etc., usually has upon the gestures and exterior, can so easily compass".

Once Mencken, in an effort to daub his *Corpsbruder* with gaudy and enticing colors (which effort, I suppose, may be considered as decidedly in the family way), said that the theory that is at the heart of Nathan's criticism is the same one championed by Benedetto Croce—"the doctrine (*to steal Henry's thunder*) that every work of art is, at bottom, unique, and that it is the business of the critic, not to label it and pigeonhole it, but to seek for its inner intent and content, and to value it according as that intent is carried out and that content is valid and worth while." Surely the appropriate critical theory for one holding the aristocratic conception of the theatre.

No other American critic of the theatre, and none even in England, has a record as estimable as Nathan's. As a literary obstetrician, in particular, he has been quite as remarkable as Mencken: he was the first to assist at the arrival of such noteworthy persons as Eugene O'Neill, Avery Hopwood, Lord Dunsany, Rita Wellman, Eleanor Gates, Clare Kummer, Jesse Lynch Wil-

liams and Susan Glaspell. Further, he has given more than one sympathetic boost to such diverse artists as Zoe Akins, Ludwig Thoma, Florenz Ziegfeld, Sasha Guitry, Lothar Schmidt, Ferenz Molnar, Roberto Bracco, Arthur Schnitzler, Max Reinhardt and Arthur Hopkins. And finally, he has waged, year after year, a solitary fight for the American production of the works of such long established foreigners as Gerhardt Hauptmann and George Bernard Shaw, and has, in the midst of this fight, given us excellent appreciations of these artists—especially of Shaw, about whom he has written more intelligently than anyone else who has treated the subject. And finally, again (if it be not painting the lily), he has consistently shown the best taste in the matter of feminine toothsomeness of any critic of the theatre of any country in my time.

A feature of Nathan which may puzzle you,—it used to confound me almightily,—is how he manages to find so many topics worth discussing in an institution as dull and hollow as the American theatre. It is explained by his truly astonishing knowledge of the practical theatre. He is able, when he finds nothing of interest in the plays of the month, to provide an engrossing and bril-

liant article upon any topic connected with the theatre, from the comparative cost of producing plays here and in Europe to the prevalence or scarcity of enticing female pins in the music-shows of the season.

Now we have the movies—that most genuinely democratic of all the queer things that have paraded under the name of art, from automobile bodies to mission furniture. A good deal of piffle has been written about the movies. The simple truth concerning them is that they serve two useful purposes: first, the ridding out of the theatre of the kind of talent that has hitherto devoted itself to such melodramatic stuff as the detective play; and second, the sidetracking of the type of theatrical brickmason who has heretofore tried to fit spectacular low comedy to the narrow confines of the theatre stage. Nathan appears to be the only American critic who has realized these facts. He alone seems to be aware that the only legitimate function of the movies is to act as toilet and sewer to Grub Street.

Of late the ban on Nathan seems to be lifting; he appears to get more just treatment at the hands of our *intelligentsia*. Looking over a stack of papers in the office this morning, I came upon

a very laudatory review of his last volume in such a respectable farm journal as "The Indianapolis News".

In your letter you accuse Henry of perpetrating practical jokes. The charge is justifiable, and might be made against Nathan, also. Recently, in a Pullman coming from the west, I encountered a poor professor who had fallen a prey to their trickery. It seems he had written Mencken, requesting some facts about his life (how professorial!), and Nathan had answered him by sending him a copy of that little booklet by "Owen Hatteras". The pedagogue, being as credulous as the rest of his class, swallowed the thing down to the cork and label, and at once wrote Nathan, thanking him and praising this "Hatteras". In reply came a letter, this time from Mencken, saying that "Hatteras" was a very capable writer, and a fine fellow personally, and that he was just then in Canada on a fishing trip.

Well, I've come to get nearly all my fun from watching too serious persons being made fools of; and so I was amused immensely by the spectacle of the good man so unwittingly seduced. However, I didn't disillusion him, and I dare say he doesn't yet suspicion how he's been fooled.

I've long since, of course, quit trying to write letters in the usual sense. If this correspondence keeps up much longer, you may find me writing solemn dissertations, paragraphed to suit the taste of Mr. Ellery Sedgwick. Still I doubt it. Before that there will probably be a reaction, and I will be writing the kind of drivel I put in my first letter.

V.

V.

June 28th

Dear G——:

You ask me if I still respect Frank Harris as much as ever, "in view of his rabid championing of certain social Perunas which you seem to dislike". I admire Harris even more today than formerly, though, of course, I don't favor his proposed reforms. These reforms, no doubt, account for his being neglected as an artist.

For as an instance of the criminal neglect of genius, the case of Harris has no parallel in the literary history of this barbarism. Dreiser, though still branded immoral, has come to be treated with something like justice. And even Mencken and Nathan, though still scoffed at by the Brahmans, have achieved the honor of being imitated and even stolen from. But for Harris there appears to be no hope. I am pretty well acquainted with the contemporary literatures of four countries (forgetting, for once, America's

status as a well-behaved colony), and I can't think of a case exactly like his. It appears that all the critics of his country (except one, of course) are in conspiracy to prevent him getting any recognition whatever.

I first met Harris when he was editor of "Vanity Fair",—I forget the year. At that time his stories were widely known and appreciated at nearly their real value, especially "Montes: The Matador", which Arnold Bennett had called "the best short story in English", and which had prompted Meredith to say, "If there is any hand in England can do better, I don't know it". Likewise, his Shakespeare books had come to be classed with the most important works dealing with the subject. Consequently, in the little discussion I can devote to him in a letter, I shall confine myself to the things he has written since coming to America—that is, the "Contemporary Portraits" and the "Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions".

Harris says somewhere that the idea of writing the portraits first occurred to him in the course of a talk with Carlyle. "Why," he asked the biographer of Frederick the Great and Cromwell, "didn't you paint your contemporaries? You met everyone in the last fifty years of any value, and

what a portrait gallery you might have given us with your seeing eyes and Rembrandt effects of sunlight and gloom."

Later, when George Moore showed him a dissertation on Verlaine's poetry, Harris rebuked him for supposing that "one could dissect a rose or help you to a sense of its perfume by telling you the quantitative and qualitative elements of the odor", and induced Moore to set down that inimitable sketch of his meeting with the French poet which is to be found in "Impressions and Opinions".

"In my portraits," says Harris, "I have always wanted to give my vision of the man—body, mind and soul—assuming nothing save that his exceptional qualities must be intimately related to his shortcomings, and regarding his peculiar virtues and vices merely as variations from type. I have never felt satisfied with my mental portrait till I could see that the man's books or works were as inevitably an outcome of him as the fruit is of the tree. His personal habits, his dress, his tricks of gesture and speech were all as important to me as his theories of art and life."

"But some may be curious not only of my purpose," he says, in another place; "but of my plan;

how does one paint a portrait so as to give the sense of life; how is one to analyze the qualities and yet keep the whole man, the living synthesis before the reader?"

The way he does this is to search out the chief feature of the man's character, and then show how it influences his life and is reflected in his works. The portrait of Carlyle is an excellent instance of the process. Here Harris finds the dominant characteristic to be sadness, a natural result of Puritanism:

"Carlyle's outlook on life was sombre and sad, never joyous; his temper desperate and despairing, not hopeful.

"All Carlyle's faults as a man of letters are sins against the spirit of Beauty, and they are all to be found writ large in Puritanism. . . .

"Carlyle's impotence made everything about him clear to me. Ever afterwards I saw him as a sort of Polyphemus, a one-eyed giant. He stood to me for Puritanism itself and explained it, in its strength and in its fatal weakness, as no one else could."

What a matchless interpretation of the Puritan who, after stating that Paganism was "a veracious expression of the earnest awe-struck feeling

of man towards the Universe", while Christianity, on the other hand, "emblemed the Law of Human Duty, the moral Law of Man," could exclaim: "What a progress is here!"

A Puritan, I say, but a great man: one of the half-dozen very great men of his century: a prophet who glimpsed some of the truths that a certain "Unspeakable Hun" (what a caddish way to slur an enemy!) was later to endow with immortality. It is to Harris' credit that he does not let his own anti-Puritanism blind him to the true stature of his subject:

"To sum it all up, Carlyle's gift to men was in essence astonishingly simple: he was the best product of English Puritanism of whom we have any knowledge. All that that belief had in it of honesty and sincerity, of single-hearted allegiance to what was true and right and just, came to fruit in Thomas Carlyle.

"It was this honesty and sincerity which gave Carlyle his solitary literary triumph. The clever, adroit, able man practically concerned with his own rewards and his own successes, the 'hero' of the school of Hume and other such historians, was abhorrent to Carlyle. All great men, he felt, were absolutely in earnest, sincere to the soul,

filled with the spirit which urges man to ever higher accomplishment. No Mahomet, no Cromwell, no Goethe is thinkable without this elemental force. All Carlyle's heroes were seers like the prophets of old, men who had a vision of the truth; men through whom, as he phrased it, God Himself had spoken. And so he taught a fat, smug grocer-folk what heroes were and how useful they were (if we must measure stars by their candle-power) and he showed a crowd that admired Crystal Palaces what a true temple was like, a temple not made with hands—eternal in the heavens."

I might go on indefinitely in this way, selecting capital passages and commenting upon them; but it seems to me that the really fair way to treat these portraits is to judge them as portraits. Now, of course, I can't judge of their accuracy, as I've only met one of the subjects, France, and don't know him well. But I can, at least, say that they meet the primary object of portraits by presenting figures who are so well accounted for that they really live. Further, they are, like everything Harris writes, delightful reading. On the whole, I should not be surprised if they outlived at least nine-tenths of the first-rate critical

writing of the time. They ought to live as a kind of monument to a man who had as high a respect for genius as anyone the Anglo-Saxon world has seen.

I now come to the "Oscar Wilde". In a publisher's office in New York, a year or so ago, I remarked that I believed this to be the best biography that had come out of America. I was promptly disputed, of course (our so-called literati are ever anxious to "slam" Harris), but I persisted —and I do still. After spending a good deal of time over the recognized masterpieces of biography, I am convinced, not only that Harris' book is vastly superior to every other work of the *genre* that America has produced, but that it is one of the best in the language.

But whether you agree with these sweeping claims or not, you must at least admit that it is charmingly written. Harris' style is so easy flowing and so superlatively simple that his book reads better than any novel I've ever encountered. My, I wish I could write like that!

Among my clippings from his magazine writings, I find the following, presumably from the "Saturday Review". He is talking of the various ways of writing biography, and concludes thus:

"Then there is the way I think the best; to paint the man as he appeared, and just as he saw himself with admiring love and perfect sympathy till he lives for you. Later it may be worth while to show him as others saw him, friends and foes alike, so that he is the focus, so to speak, of a dozen different lights; but all the while the love and admiration of the writer must keep the reader's interest by interpreting the very soul of his subject.

"One very memorable, yet minor fact, you will find in this biography-writing if you seek to make your subject live; his virtues and powers must be balanced or offset, so to speak, by faults and whimsies. You can make a man live by blocking in his faults and vices but not by praising his virtues and qualities; you can mark outlines better by black shadows than by high lights. And so the biographer is compelled to recall his hero's shortcomings, his faults, his vices, his superstitions and humors with particularity; but never with contempt or dislike, or so to speak, from above."

That is what Harris has tried to do in the case of Wilde, and no one can say that he has not succeeded. With the unwavering honesty that

characterizes everything he does, he has given us a portrait that, more justly than any other I know of, deserves the term "full-length". He even takes proper account of Wilde's heredity, and by bringing out the abnormal eroticism of his father and the vanity and extravagant Bohemianism of his mother, he makes his subject more comprehensible than has anyone else. By such well-calculated devices Harris finally presents to us a Wilde that is diametrically opposed to the traditional conception—a person at once a good deal more worthy and more likeable, and, above and beyond all else, an artist in the truest sense.

Please note here that I am recording Harris' impression of Wilde, and not my own. I met him only once or twice, and failed to like him because of two characteristics of his which I have always delegated to actors, and for which, therefore, I have profound detestation—to wit, vanity and effeminacy. Harris gives a snap-shot of him at their first meeting that may convey an inkling of what I mean:

"He shook hands in a limp way·I disliked; his hands were flabby, greasy; his skin looked bilious and dirty. He wore a great green scarab ring on one finger. He was over-dressed rather than

well-dressed; his clothes fitted him too tightly; he was too stout. He had a trick which I noticed even then, which grew on him later, of pulling his jowl with his right hand as he spoke, and his jowl was already fat and pouchy. His appearance filled me with distaste."

But everybody must acknowledge that it is pity rather than disgust that is evoked by the weak-willed child that finally arises from Harris' pages. And despite the objections of reviewers ranging all the way from Lola Pratts on the newspapers to the Prof. Dr. Otto Heller, I persist in believing that this is the authentic Wilde. These reviewers assume that Harris didn't know his man, and so, of course, appear rather funny.

I have said that he was an artist in the truest sense. What I mean is that he had the artist's view of life—that view which sees human existence not as a thing about which to moralize, but primarily a beautiful spectacle, to be exploited by the artist. It is a view signally opposed to the decadent one with which Christianity has cursed the world: it is, in fact, essentially Greek. Of the wisdom of it I have discoursed in earlier letters, and I shall not repeat the exposition here. The older I become the more impossible I find it to

deduce any lesson from life. In the few years I have lived I have seen innumerable little men lay down elaborate tables of laws by which one should live, and occasionally some of these laws have seemed so sensible to me that I have put them in practice. But I have never done so once without immediately encountering persons who laughed at my laws, and who, still, were a good deal better off mentally and spiritually than I. As a result of such experiences, I have come to look upon life as purely an aesthetic spectacle. But while I arrived at this view of existence only after many years of observation and ratiocination, Wilde—like Goethe before him—appears to have attained it quite early.

Now, a man who holds this belief—a Greek born out of time—is marked for sure and swift destruction in an atmosphere as puritanical as that of Anglo-Saxondom. The destruction, in Wilde's case, took the form of a legal inquisition. The particular charge brought against him bore all the signs of having been trumped up; but even if it were not—even if it were perfectly sound—you might ask why on earth anyone should want to drag such an affair into the spotlight. And by asking this, you would show a lack of under-

standing of the character of the Puritan, a character too inadequately treated by psychologists. Though masquerading as Virtue incarnate, the Puritan is really of so salacious a nature that he cannot resist the temptation to start a legal sex-show by punishing those with whom he does not agree. This obsession with things sexual, it seems to me, amounts actually to a kind of derangement. It was proven by the Wilde affair. There we had a clear case of sexual pervert persecuting sexual pervert. Here is a superb passage from Harris' introduction:

"In this book the reader will find the figure of the Prometheus-artist clamped, so to speak, with bands of steel to the huge gigantic cliff of English Puritanism. No account was taken of his manifold virtues and graces: no credit given him for his extraordinary achievements: he was hounded out of life because his sins were not the sins of the English middle-class. The culprit was in much nobler and better than his judges.

"Here are all the elements of pity and sorrow and fear that are required in great tragedy."

Wilde the artist got much encouragement from the members of the aristocracy. "It was not his views on art, however," says Harris, "which

recommended him to the aristocratic set in London; but his contempt for social reform, or rather his utter indifference to it, and his English love of inequality." If this is intended as an indictment of the intellectual standards of the aristocracy of Wilde's day, it is extremely silly. Intelligent Englishmen are slowly coming to realize that the old aristocracy, for all its faults, was an incalculable influence for good in all the higher activities, especially the arts and literature. Look at this—from a journal that has long been, and is still, one of the most radical in England:

"The time may soon come when poets and artists of the kind whose rare and startling ideas have done not a little to put democracy in power, may half-regret, in weak moments and when hungry, the old days of lordly patronage. For the old aristocracy did admit the existence of artists, at the servant's entrance, and found something to spare for their support from the upkeep of the stables. But I know of no clause in the constitution of the Trades Union Congress by which Keats could beg of the delegates the means to publish his odes. Perhaps a little back-stair influence with Mr. Bowerman, of the compositors, would assist him; but that help, though kindly,

would be irregular, and if discovered might produce the usual 'most emphatic protest' from an incorruptible and class-conscious representative of the Brass Instrument Makers."

A few of the aristocracy, however, did aid in Wilde's persecution. Harris says little concerning this, but I believe he must know the explanation. For the trouble with that aristocracy is simple: it has become so pervaded with middle-class hogs that it has almost ceased to be an aristocracy. The process was well under way in Wilde's time, and the war brought about its almost complete triumph; but it has been going on a long while. It has made the history of modern England (as a similar process has made the history of America since the civil war) a history of the exploitation of swine by super-swine—instead of, as was the case under the landed oligarchy (and of our own South under the old aristocracy), a history of the exploitation of swine by a class that had a sound claim to superiority.

The case of Harris suggests the larger question of socialism and the intellectuals.

I suppose no gentlemen is in favor of the plutocracy remaining the first estate. Never before, certainly, has that place been held by a class so

unworthy of it. Intellectually, indeed, it seems to be hardly above illiteracy. For example, with Christianity—theology and ethics alike—practically forgotten for a quarter of a century by all superior men, the plutocracy still sticks to its pew and bawls for the morals of a slave.

Further, the plutocracy lacks one thing that is characteristic of every caste of gentlemen. I refer, of course, to aloofness from the intimate affairs of inferiors (aided by common decency—that exclusive possession of uncommon men). The plutocracy's lack of this leads it into all its imbecile attempts to regulate the conduct of others—at the moment exemplified on the one hand, in its suppression of free discussion, and, on the other, in its encouragement (financial and otherwise) of the prohibitionist—that pure and righteous violator of homes.

No, the plutocracy gets no sympathy from gentlemen anywhere; and the day is fervently awaited when its swinish actions must have their inevitable boomerang effect and send it toppling —to be supplanted by an upper class of really superior men.

By this last remark, to be sure, I take a position opposed to all those intellectuals (socialists of one

kind or another) whose contempt for the present order has misled them into believing that the way to remedy it is to continue the democratic movement still farther—in fine, to supplant the reigning money-grubbers by the mob from which they came. This last is an instance of how men of unusual intellectual powers are occasionally led into a blind alley. For the only trouble with the plutocrat—what makes him so offensive to the nose—is that he is merely a mob-man—a mob-man at his highest possible point of development, to be sure, but still a mob-man: he has simply succeeded at the mob-man's game—the stuffing of his gut,—the chief concern of all low men at all times and everywhere.

If the Anatole Frances, the Romain Rollands, the Bernard Shaws, and the Frank Harrises will propose an order of things that will put themselves and those who appreciate their art into first place in the state, I'll agree to carry their red card. But when they promulgate a scheme that would put in that place a crowd even more worthless than the rich damnfools who now occupy it—then I have to say that I'll tolerate the damnfools till I'm sure of getting something better.

But perhaps it is not quite fair to Harris to put

him with the socialists. In a late number of "Pearson's" he says: "Time and again I have written that 'equality is the worst injustice'." A queer kind of socialist, indeed! And yet the belief that he is one has undoubtedly been the chief cause of his want of recognition in this most intolerant of lands.

VI.

VI.

October 24th

My dear G——:

You tell me that you have seen Rascoe's estimate of Dreiser's "Twelve Men," and consider it too complimentary, etc., and you conclude by wondering if I would now present the "Tribune" with "that over-scented bouquet" I handed it in one of my letters.

I would. I admire the "Tribune" for having taken some long strides towards a saner national journalism—for doing many of the things I tried and failed at. When I owned a big city daily, I had to fill up the editorial columns with perfumed piffle concerning "The Wisdom of The People", "The Need of Better Morals", and so on. The Tribune devotes its columns to discourses on the deleterious levelling effect of democracy, and the attempt to subject the few remaining American gentlemen to the straight-jacket methods of the inebriate ward. How it gets away with it I'm sure I can't make out, as I thought my experience had

proven pretty conclusively that a newspaper, in order to live, must be a kind of dog biscuit.

With regard to what Rascoe says about "Twelve Men": I don't think he has over-rated it. However, I don't agree with Dreiser's own opinion (according to the publishers' advertisement) that the book is the best thing he has done. An attempt to determine what that is, must inevitably lead, not to this new volume, but to a choice between "Jennie Gerhardt" and "The Titan".

Now the proving of this statement will involve an examination of Dreiser's claim to be considered an artist of the first rank, and I will ask you to pardon me if, in doing this, I repeat some of the statements I made when speaking of Mencken.

First, then, let me tell you what you no doubt have already discovered—namely, that as a craftsman, a worker with lath and plaster and paint, Theodore Dreiser is very deficient. The maltreatment of English, in particular, has become traditional with him; a Dreiser novel without a good deal if it would be as queer a bird as a Greenwich Villager with genius. This failing shows most glaringly in his selection of words and phrases; as see the following, taken at random from a typical page of his: "frank, open counten-

ance", "innocent, diffident manner", "helpless poor", "honest necessity".

Nor is he much more adept at constructing a narrative. He seems to enjoy taking a simple story, breaking it in two, and filling in the gap with another simple story, and then loading down the whole with a ton or more of unimportant and foolish details. The interjection of the story of Hurstwood into that of Carrie Meeber, in "Sister Carrie", and the laborious piling up of marring details in "The Financier", are not isolated instances by any means: you will find parallel cases in nearly every one of Dreiser's novels.

Well, now, if he is a poor stylist (or better, perhaps, not a stylist at all), and a crude performer at the feat of telling a tale—if, in fine, he is totally lacking in all those qualities by which, according to the professors, a novelist is to be judged—what right have I to call him a first-rate artist?

The reason is, that he has got into every one of his novels, to some degree at least, the two philosophical rhythms that are the distinguishing marks of all great narrative fiction. The primary of these is well stated in Dreiser's own words: "Among the forces which sweep and play

throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind." A distinctively deterministic philosophy—a view of man as a creature desirous only of self-gratification, but ever a helpless plaything of multifarious and all-powerful forces. It is only through the possession by the novelist of this view of man that the characters of a narrative are made to seem authentic—that, in a word, the artist enables the reader to enjoy the supreme aesthetic pleasure of "emotional kinship". (I again lean upon Mencken, as is only proper in a province which—as I have admitted in another letter—is rightfully his own.) This is why we have ever discovered an essential reality about the characters in all the great novels of the past; and it is, likewise, why we find this reality about the characters in every novel of Theodore Dreiser's, from "Sister Carrie" to "The Genius".

The other philosophical element, or rhythm, might be considered a corollary of the one just described. It is the reflection of the artist's belief that man's life-long quest of self-gratification, his ceaseless hoping and striving, is ever unrewarded —and is, therefore, a tragedy without meaning. "What is all modern literature," asks George Moore, "but a reek of regret that we are but

bubbles on a stream?" Surely, the word "modern" is superfluous; any great creative artist in history might have said (I again quote from Moore): "Death and life always overlapping, mixed inextricably, and no meaning in anything, merely a stream of change in which things happen. Sometimes the happenings are pleasant, sometimes unpleasant, and in neither the pleasant nor the unpleasant can we detect any purpose." A view of life as something much too strong for the sons of men—

" . . . mortal men; poor wretches, who like leaves
Flourish awhile, and eat the fruits of earth,
But, sapless, soon decay."

These two philosophical rhythms are, as I said a moment ago, the chief components of great narrative fiction. The first provides a representation of life; the second, at once a representation and a criticism. It is because these rhythms are more prominent in "Jennie Gerhardt" and "The Titan" than in Dreiser's other works that I selected these two as the best things he has done.

Two or three years ago, Mencken, ruminating upon "The Genius", remarked that the chief dan-

ger threatening Dreiser was an unconscious reversion to the barbarous moral code of his own Indiana. This was undoubtedly true at the time, but lately another danger quite as grave has come to overshadow him, in the form of a sexual obsession, to be observed especially in his play (almost a yokel-shocker), "The Hand of the Potter". This aberration, I feel sure, is the result, partly of the natural curiosity of a civilized man in a people laboring under a puritan Palmerism, and partly of too much occupation with the engrossing files of Freud, Jung, Havelock Ellis & Co. But whatever its causes, it is a serious blight upon one of the two chief novelists of the land. Perhaps he will shake himself free of it in "The Bulwark." As good Americans of the unconventional kind, let us hope so, at least.

In the article just referred to, Mencken tried to explain Dreiser's inferiority to Conrad by the occasional inconsistency of his (Dreiser's) attitude towards his philosophical beliefs. Here the damnably right Henry bit on a sour one. For the truth is, that Dreiser at his best falls short of Conrad at his in the purely mechanical departments of novel-writing—in jointing, in painting, in varnishing—and in these alone.

I note that you say you showed Henry the letter in which I discussed him, and that he laughed at several of my bouquets, particularly my effort (successful, I still believe) to prove him the discoverer of Dreiser. It happens, by the way, that he told me just the other evening that the man who introduced him to Dreiser's work was George Bronson Howard.

This Howard offers an excellent illustration of how a writer of considerable promise can be kept from worthy achievement through the fact that he happens to live in a country where there is no secure body of civilized opinion. A man capable of things of a high order, he found it necessary quite early in his career to succumb to the ever dazzling temptation to canter and prance before the only audience in the country that can keep a writer in bread and butter. Oh, I know what you are saying: that no genuine artist could be thus seduced. Well, the history of American letters doesn't bear you out. For one Poe or Whitman with the moral courage to resist the bedizenment, there have been any number of Mark Twains who have fallen. Well, what of it? Isn't this state of affairs just one of the many admirable virtues inherent in an order of society that has but lately

been proclaimed ideal by all our professors of literature, and with which, according to these *intelligentsia*, the "barbarous and thieving" culture of Germany must be blessed before it can ever again attract the chaste glances of right-thinking men?

But perhaps Howard can "come back". At least, his recent "Birds of Prey" encourages us to hope so. It is a book as worthy the attention of the elect as a certain novel of the season, by name, "The Rise of David Livinsky", by Abraham Cahan. In each book there are characters that move and breathe in distinctively American atmospheres—in the former, that paradise of cads and oafs, Broadway; in the latter, the East Side Ghetto, where the Russian Jew takes his first lessons in the 100% American game of stuffing his gut.

Your mention of Rascoe reminds me of something. For a long while I was puzzled by the fact that the "Tribune" had such a good critic; and it was only recently that Mencken enlightened me, by explaining that Joseph Medill Paterson was an editor of the paper. Of course, that makes it perfectly clear. For an artist of Patter-

son's stature to tolerate a critic of lesser ability than Rascoe would be to become a traitor to his art, just as he will become a traitor to it if he ever permits Rascoe to leave the "Tribune".

Patterson is, I repeat, an artist of not inconsiderable merit. He has written one novel, "Rebellion", that puts him among the first half-dozen contemporary American novelists. It is the story of a Catholic girl who, after years of obedience to the law of the Church in the matter of a loveless marriage, finally rebels and marries the man she desires. A tale that might easily have become banal and degenerated into a hodgepodge of moralizings. Yet the author has avoided this throughout; and, further, at the chief task of the novelist—the creation of characters that appear really alive—has succeeded in nearly every instance.

Let us hope that the daily mental rationing of cattle will not democratize his genius to the vanishing point.

I wish you would not continually rail against my "habit of using expressions that merit the term 'vulgar'." If there is anything you don't like about my letters, please take the trouble to forget

to answer, as I have already said about all I feel like saying, and would be very glad to be relieved from planning anything more.

But here I wax groggy, and hence un-American, and so had best leave off.

VII.

VII.

October 2nd

Dear G——:

In keeping with my custom of opening my letters by considering your objections to my ideas, I here take the liberty of quoting from your recent note. "Your theory regarding poetry," you say, "—the theory that poetry should obey the principle of sameness with difference, in form as well as in matter,—seems to me, after a good deal of thought, to be inadequate."

Perhaps my theory is insufficient; but I will have to have it proven so before I withdraw it. Some very beautiful poetry, I'll admit, doesn't agree with the theory; but it seems to me that most great poetry does. And so I'll stick to it for the present. However, I'm always glad to have a row over a matter like this.

I am overjoyed to discover that there is at least one thing upon which we can agree—namely, the unusual merit of Willa Sibert Cather.

In an earlier letter, endeavoring to prove that

Mencken, and not Edward Garnett, discovered Dreiser, I quoted some remarks of Garnett's which displayed a total failure to appreciate the Hoosier. Fearing that this might give you a wrong impression of this Englishman's abilities as a critic, I quote the following, which came at the conclusion of the article containing the comment upon Dreiser—and which proves that Garnett early recognized the genius of Miss Cather:

"This work, 'O Pioneers', with its record, so typical, of a network of immigrant roots which are thrusting deep into American soil, and fructifying the nationai life with its ramifying human energies, belongs to a precious, if small, class of American novels which it is difficult to praise too highly."

Miss Cather's first novel was "Alexander's Bridge", which was published in 1912. In my record, under date of June 20, 1912, I find the following:

"Read a short novel, 'Alexander's Bridge', by a new author, Willa S. Cather. Concerns a civil engineer who engages in an extra-matrimonial affair, and, at the moment he finds it impossible to extricate himself, is killed by the collapse of a bridge. Despite the artificial ending and the quite

perceptible moral odor of the story, the characters at moments seem so very real, and the writing throughout is so charming and concise, that I believe, if the author were not a woman, I should try to give her some advice and encouragement."

It was undoubtedly the artist's instinct of appropriateness that led her in her later volumes—"O Pioneers," "The Song of the Lark" and "My Antonia"—to abandon the locale of New England for that of her own west. Certainly this change accounts to a considerable extent for the progressive improvement to be observed in these volumes. In each successive one, indeed, there is visible a better mastery of the fundamentals of narrative fiction at its best, and in "My Antonia" that mastery is well-nigh perfect. In all three there are the two features which I have formerly designated as characteristic of all great fiction—to wit, characters who are so well accounted for that they seem really to live, and an utterly disillusioned view of the blind hoping and striving f man. It is in "My Antonia", as I have already ›ted, that these elements are most prominent. ınow of no character in the literature that has ›re of reality than the Bohemian peasant girl. l, likewise, I know of no novel in the literature

that better portrays the meaningless struggle of man with the forces which rule him.

To my knowledge, no American critic has as yet attempted to put Miss Cather in her proper place in the contemporary letters of the country (indeed, only a handful have deigned to notice her); but the job appears so inviting that I'm going to chance it. Of her mastery of the two philosophical elements I have already spoken: they are quite as evident in her best work as in any novel of Dreiser's. Likewise, her command of the technique of novel-writing is unmistakable: for good-writing and a tale well told, there is no American novel, past or present, that deserves to sit beside "My Antonia". Contemplating her work beside that of Dreiser, in fact, I begin to feel leery about an old affection. Her method I like much better than his. Instead of the laborious piling up of multitudinous details, which is sometimes very effective, but ofttimes very marring (as in "The Financier", "The Genius", etc.), there is a delicate sketching in of features, a charming indirectness that attains the desired end, and seems to me to be better art than the Dreiserian method. Really, the Indianan will have to hurry up. If he doesn't show his old form in "The Bul-

wark", we will have to kiss him good-by, and start burning incense to Miss Cather.

A writer whose career has points of resemblance to that of Miss Cather, is Sherwood Anderson. He, too, wrote a first novel, "Windy McPherson's Son", which had an unmistakable ethical stink, and his second work, "Marching Men", suffered from the same defect. It was only in "Winesburg, Ohio" that he shook himself utterly free of the national literary tradition, and, by so doing, achieved a work that, for sheer originality, is unrivalled by anything that any American has ever done. Here Anderson has shown us the spark of romance beneath the drab aspect of a middle-western town. It is an accomplishment of a very high order, especially for an American. Still it doesn't quite satisfy me. I know the typical middle-western town as well as Anderson, and it seems to me that the proportion of romance to drabness in his picture is much too great. Also, he portrays none of the flivver Comstocks that contribute so greatly to that drabness. By all means, let us have a study of the middle-western town by some one with a more cynical eye. What the subject needs (as well as the nation generally) is a Swift.

I should like to talk about another writer whom I admire, George Moore, and should do so, were I not determined to confine myself to American subjects. By the way, why doesn't some one do a just appreciation of Moore? I nominate Burton Rascoe for the job. I once hoped to do it myself, but the task balks me. There is something about Moore, I have to admit, that belongs solely to youth. Probably it is his too great interest (almost an obsession) in the emotional perversion known as love. Approaching senility, I find it increasingly difficult to get interested in the thing; it begins, indeed, to take on the aspect of (and the expression sounds familiar) *une affaire de la peau*—and hence, a damned nuisance. Recalling every one of the women with whom I have imagined myself in love, I fall to doubting that I ever had for them any other feeling than this.

I say "every one"; and yet I should, perhaps, make an exception. And why do I so honor her? I'm sure I don't know, unless it is because I've met her only once—the late Charles Frohman, then her manager, introduced us one evening in the Savoy, ten or twelve years ago—and I've never seen her since except from the orchestra.

By the way, I wonder what she was appearing

in when I met her? Of course, it was a music show, and I have a faint recollection that it was entitled the "Admirable" or "Worthy" Somebody; but that's as far as my memory will go. However, I'll find out, as I'm driving up to Baltimore tonight, and Nathan will be there.